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ABSTRACT

The structural and curricular changes currently being experienced by British further education (FE) colleges pose special challenges for FE colleges committed to providing for vocational students with disabilities and learning difficulties. Despite great progress in the area of expanding the educational opportunities available to disabled persons, much work remains to be done to ensure that core skill requirements and the demands of external written tests do not deny access to a significant number of disabled learners. The effectiveness of frameworks for the progression of students with disabilities will depend largely on the attitudes of their parents and the professionals and employers involved in their training. Partnerships remain crucial to ensuring the disabled students' progression to/achievement of National Vocational Qualifications. Formulation of flexible outcomes and individual action plans are also crucial to ensuring that disabled students have access to and achieve success in FE college programs. Regular developments in FE colleges are all relevant to learners with disabilities and learning disabilities, and advice on these topics is available in many Further Education Unit publications. (A sample action plan for FE colleges and action plan development worksheet are included.) (MN)

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ED 366 821

December 1993

VET AND PROGRESSION

FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN FE COLLEGES

Further education colleges are experiencing major changes to their structures, the curriculum and its assessment. While these changes will affect all learners, there are particular challenges for FE colleges which are committed to providing for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties: to increase their participation and attainment and promote their progression while paying attention to the quality of this provision. For those planning and delivering such provision, this document provides some guidance on employment-led provision for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties, as well as an update of recent developments.

A REALISTIC OBJECTIVE?

The principle that all learners with disabilities and learning difficulties should have adult status, has underpinned FEU's work on integration, self advocacy, and employment and has been the rationale for much of our inter-agency work. FE plays a vital role in enabling people with disabilities and learning difficulties to achieve each element of adult status, these being:

- personal autonomy and independence;
- economic self-sufficiency;
- a range of roles within the family;
- participation in the community.

(*Young People with Handicaps: The road to adulthood* OECD/CERI, 1986)

Employment and employability are legitimate and achievable goals for this group of learners. Obtaining qualifications and employment is more difficult for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. It is even more so while job opportunities are not plentiful. Continuing to train in a recession is a prudent measure and this applies to learners with disabilities and learning difficulties as much as it does to anyone else. Such learners are entitled to take part in regular vocational programmes alongside their peers and to have the additional support they may need.

NVQs and Learners with Special Needs (FEU, 1990) identified difficulties in obtaining NVQs. Some conditionally accredited NVQs were still heavily knowledge-based, demanding literacy levels above those required in the workplace. The delivery of such learning opportunities was frequently by traditional, course-based methods so that credit accumulation and the accreditation of prior learning were difficult to achieve. Some standards were felt to discriminate unnecessarily against those with physical or sensory disabilities. Others were felt to be too narrowly defined and task specific.

Since then much progress has been made. Awarding bodies are now more active in putting their equal opportunities policies into practice. Colleges have developed expertise in breaking down competences and making achievement of elements and units of NVQs possible for a wider range of learners. Agricultural (land-based) colleges in particular have developed many accessible learning programmes leading to NVQs.

An increasing number of qualifications are becoming available. NCVQ's *Monitor* lists 88 NVQs available at level 1 in eight occupational areas. A further 33 are expected to be submitted to the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) for approval by March 1994. This is in addition to those at level 2 and beyond. General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) at Foundation Level are available in five vocational areas at a limited number of centres from September 1993 in addition to those available at levels 2 and 3. Not all of these are yet appropriate for some learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. Problems such as accrediting achievement below level 1 NVQ and the emphasis on full NVQs rather than units are yet to be resolved, but nevertheless there has been a significant increase in the number and type of qualifications on offer.

There are further challenges to be met before access to vocational qualifications becomes the norm for people with disabilities and learning difficulties. GNVQ at Foundation Level is a great step forward, but there are anxieties about the extent to which core skills requirements and the demands of external written tests will deny access for a significant number of learners. Maintaining congruence between the level of vocational competence and accompanying core skill requirement is vital if students with learning difficulties are not to be at a disadvantage. The value of achievement below level 2 needs to be acknowledged, perhaps by being included explicitly in future in the National Targets for Education and Training (NETTs). The part played by the National Record of Achievement (NRA) in recording such achievement cannot be over-emphasised.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

As a consequence of changes in curriculum and qualifications pre and post 16 it is possible to chart a framework of progression from National Curriculum attainment targets to G/NVQs (see Figure 1). However, in order to be effective, a framework for progression depends very much on the attitudes of all the professionals and of parents, learners and employers involved.

FEU's project Transition to Employment showed that learners with disabilities and learning difficulties can achieve NVQs, although they may require extra time and support. However, attitudes to learners differ as the following two case studies show.

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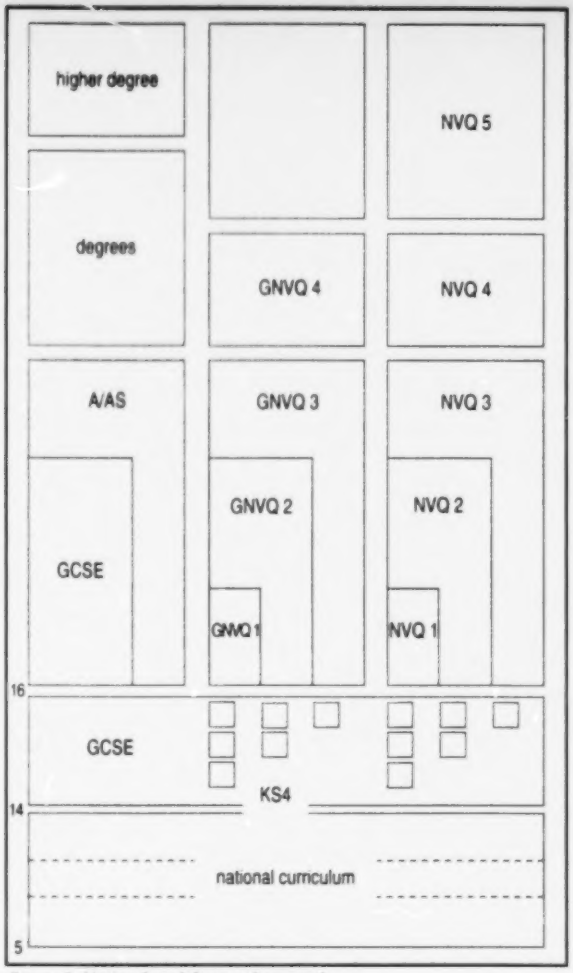

Figure 1. National qualification framework

Martin is a training credit holder progressing from a college bridging course. He had been endorsed as a Category B trainee* and was to be trained by a provider contracted by the TEC to provide training for such people. Martin was not convinced of the quality of this training. With the assistance of his careers officer and the college he successfully gained a place on a regular scheme with another provider. His endorsement was removed as the provider did not have a contract relating to endorsed trainees.

Martin is following the NVQ level 2 Diploma in Warehousing Storage and Distribution. He has currently been assessed on, and achieved, seven complete units and is more than half way to completing his NVQ. He is highly motivated, perhaps helped by the provision of a flow chart displaying trainees' progress.

Unfortunately, some young people do not meet such positive attitudes, as Susan's case demonstrates:

While at college Susan had chosen a foundation option based on NVQ level 1 Retail. Her subsequent work experience in an outlet of a national retail chain was highly successful. The branch manager informed the college that she was the most able person he had taken on work placement. Application for a place on the firm's YT scheme had to be made through its head office. Susan was rejected on the grounds that her educational background indicated that she would not achieve the competences demanded by NVQ Retail. Appeals by the careers office and the college proved unsuccessful. Susan joined a training scheme where most trainees have special training needs.

Attitudes towards learners with disabilities and learning difficulties clearly need to change. Employers, TECs and providers of education and training all have a crucial role to play. FEU's work on Transition to Employment confirmed that progression is dependent on collaboration between various agencies. Colleges, perhaps in co-operation with TECs, need to take the lead in emphasising what may be achieved and signposting the support mechanisms available to all those involved, especially potential employers. Colleges need to be active in finding out what is available in terms of qualifications and use local labour market intelligence to judge where job opportunities may exist.

A FOCUS ON PROGRESSION

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) is designed to ensure that the existing range of FE provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is maintained. Under Section 2 of the Act, FEFC has a duty to secure educational facilities for 16 to 18 year old students in full-time education. Under Section 3 it also has a duty in respect of older full-time students (over 18) and part-time students (over 16) attending courses covered by Schedule 2 of the Act. In fulfilling this duty, Section 4 of the Act requires the Council to have regard to the requirements of students with learning difficulties, including those with disabilities. (FEFC Circ. 92/06)

FEFC's criteria for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties, and its emphasis on progression has provided a stimulus for a much-needed rethink of some provision. Colleges need to provide learning opportunities which allow

* Training opportunities and endorsement: when this example was obtained, people with special training needs were defined in the TEC operating manual as those who:

i. face a disability or personal disadvantage which significantly impairs learning;

ii. require significant extra or specialised training and/or support beyond that normally needed.

Young people entering YT who have STN are endorsed as Category A, B or C. This is normally a function of the Careers Service. The categories are defined thus:

Category A — Young people whose disadvantages prevent access to vocational or effective receipt of YT training and who require a period initial training preparation.

Category B — Young people for whom training aimed at NVQ Level 2 is not thought to be realistic on the basis of current assessment.

Category C — Young people who have some prospect of achieving NVQ Level 2, but are not likely to do so without significant additional support and help.

learners to gain qualifications, or prepare for progression to other provision which will; or demonstrate planned progression within the programme itself. If this requirement is viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat, learners with disabilities and learning difficulties may experience significantly better learning programmes.

However, progression needs to be flexibly defined to take account of the many different forms it may take. For example: at one college, social services and education offer a joint course called Transition to Working Life. The course is based on an industrial estate with students spending one day a week in college. Students each have an individual programme based on a common core. A placement officer supports students on work experience and in work placement and offers advice on issues such as benefits and accommodation.

Such provision will need to clearly demonstrate progression to secure funding under Schedule 2.

LEARNING SUPPORT

The role of learner support is increasingly recognised as important for all learners. The recent Audit Commission/OFSTED report *Unfinished Business* drew attention to the need for guidance to ensure appropriate and informed choice, and for support systems which assist successful completion of courses and minimise the number of early leavers. This may result in increased emphasis on learning support systems for all learners in order to maximise the achievement of their full potential. All learners experience some difficulty with learning along a continuum of need at various points in their learning programme.

MORE WILL MEAN DIFFERENT

Growth targets required by FEFC will result in a wider range of learners needing to be accommodated. More will mean different. All these potential learners may require additional arrangements for their access to, and support during, education and training. Colleges will need to:

- consider the overall nature of their offer. What will they subsidise or protect?
- plan their programmes on a sufficiently wide base to accommodate individual demands, learning styles and rates of learning;
- take a broad approach to the assessment of prior learning;
- have in place flexible systems for managing and supporting learning and its assessment.

One test of quality, in the context of new arrangements for the government and funding of post-16 provision arising out of the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century*, will be the level at which learners with disabilities and learning difficulties participate. FE colleges will need to ensure that as well as increasing general levels of participation they are providing opportunities for all members of their community.

Incremental change can bring about significant improvements particularly when supported by management commitment and clear statements of policy. Planned incremental change may bring about short- and medium-term rewards for learners and tutors. But this must be in tune with the college's mission and development plan if the development is not to be marginalised.

STRATEGIES FOR PROGRESSION

The development and assessment of competence has been at the centre of the learning process for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties for many years. The promotion of the competence model across the FE curriculum, associated with the extension of the NVQ framework, suggests that colleges could learn much from an area which for too long has been seen, by those both within and without it, as separate and marginal. Specialist tutors' understanding of task analysis and of the range of strategies that can be employed would be of enormous benefit to all learners.

Sharing expertise within institutions between specialist and vocational staff may result in better learning opportunities, as these examples illustrate:

One department in a college normally offered theory in the morning and practical sessions in the afternoon, but found that students with learning difficulties were having difficulty concentrating on putting theory into practice. Discussions with specialist tutors led to the adoption of a new approach with short inputs of theory, followed by practical work, debrief, then onto the next stage. This proved so successful that they now use a similar format for all student groups with positive results.

An agricultural machinery tutor was concerned about trainees who were struggling with the theory related to his subject, because of their lack of literacy and numeracy skills. An adult basic education (ABE) tutor worked alongside him in class and gave basic skills back-up as he taught vocational areas. Their work has enabled them to relate the vocational skills to the appropriate elements in Wordpower and Numberpower. Thus the staff have benefited in developing teaching strategies and the students have benefited in terms of their learning and its outcomes.

Clearly the cost-effectiveness of such co-teaching needs to be proved. However, such arrangements need not be long term and may indeed be cost effective if they result in better learning more quickly and to a higher level. It may be that regular lecturers would rarely need such a high level of support on a permanent basis and even then only when the nature of a learner's particular disability or learning difficulty make it necessary. In the example above, the vocational tutor undertook training to acquire the necessary skills to cope without help.

Continually reviewing support needs is vitally important to ensure scarce resources are used effectively and efficiently. Continuing to support needs which have already been met, denies success.

PARTNERS IN PROGRESSION

Many support groups flourish at LEA, regional and national levels and are held together by a common purpose — that of sharing practice and ideas for the benefit of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. It is important that such collaboration is not lost after FE college incorporation. Some of this networking has been underpinned by Work-related Further Education (WRFE) Development Funding, through involvement in FEU projects or by support from LEAs and RACs.

One such example was a project based at the Northern Council for Further Education funded through the WRFE Development Fund. It involved 13 colleges and aimed to encourage access to vocational achievement for students with special needs by examining the process and content of the curriculum for existing NVQ courses and provision for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties, to identify links and similarities, and design a framework which will both meet the needs of the student and record achievement in a vocational context. For a relatively small amount of money — £1,000 each — the colleges explored issues and produced materials clustered around themes, one of these being NVQ/Vocational Competence.

Each college had its own aims and objectives and action plan for implementation. The cluster groups acted as support groups, but also wrote materials for learners working toward NVQs (see Other sources of information list: FE support to meet particular needs).

The challenge for such network groups is to establish or strengthen their contacts with regular development groups rather than perpetuating separatism. FEU's support for the introduction of GNVQs has, for example, included a support network facilitated by its Regional Development Officers. This type of focused network should prove valuable to specialist tutors by informing them of mainstream developments and informing other practitioners of the needs of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

MOVING ON TO NVQ PROGRAMMES

For a very few learners with disabilities and learning difficulties, discrete provision may be the most appropriate initial step. However, this should be seen as the way toward mainstream provision and not an end in itself. **The curriculum on offer in a discrete programme must have progression as a primary aim.** This is true for all learners regardless of their disability or learning difficulty. Progression can take many forms. This may raise difficulties when the only option for some learners appears to be the local day centre, but it is part of rationale for this work that boundaries are pushed back. What is provided in college must affect what comes next. Many tutors are working with, for example, day-centre managers to review the education element of their programme. Colleges should ensure that clear progression routes are mapped out and that assessment of the learners' developing skills takes place and is recorded. Students with learning difficulties must have access to the expertise of vocational staff and resources.

Wherever possible learners will choose to pursue their chosen option in a mainstream programme alongside their peers. The basis of this choice is information, and it follows that information about the range of provision on offer and the learning support available and likely progression routes is required.

The following example, taken from the WRFE project referred to above shows what can be done.

> 'Our past experience has proved that it is possible for some of our students to advance onto a full-time regular college course where a full NVQ will be the outcome.
>
> Some students will only gain elements towards NVQs at present and we realised the importance of addressing ourselves to this group of students.
>
> We had begun to write our curriculum in this format but time was needed for a continuance of work across all curriculum areas. We have now written more than 100 case studies covering all vocational areas.'

In another WRFE project in the Yorkshire and Humberside region, staff at Bradford and Ilkley College undertook research to investigate the difficulties of three students with disabilities attempting to achieve NVQs on a BTEC first Diploma Course. The students, one blind, one profoundly deaf and one with cerebral palsy, were all able to achieve a full NVQ with some degree of support and extra planning. Details about this work are available from the Yorkshire and Humberside Association for Further and Higher Education (YHAFHE), Dewsbury Business and Media Centre, 13 Wellington Road, Dewsbury WF13 1XG.

FLEXIBLE OUTCOMES

In order to promote progression, greater flexibility in determining what counts as valid outcomes is required, particularly on the part of the Employment Department and TECs. For many learners achieving units of G/NVQs may represent a satisfactory outcome of a learning programme and provide a sufficient testimony of competence.

Learners with disabilities and learning difficulties may have primary learning needs, concerned with behavioural difficulties or basic skills which must be addressed before they can access formal qualifications. There may be some tension between meeting individual needs and meeting specific vocational requirements as this example illustrates.

> Michael, a training credit holder, was on employer-based YT. His work involved meeting and dealing with the public. As Michael has communication difficulties and behavioural problems, personal goals relating to these needs were negotiated between Michael, his trainer and employer. These goals were not seen as legitimate achievement targets by the TEC and, as such, failed to qualify for output related funding.

Many colleges and TECs are now working together to agree outcomes which reflect progression and distance travelled towards qualifications.

ACTION PLANNING

Increasingly, young people are leaving school with a personal action plan of some description, sometimes related specifically to a YT scheme or to training credits.

A recent FEU project which looked at the action planning process and training credits found that careers officers, school teachers and college tutors saw action planning as a long-term process which helped young people to take more responsibility for their own learning. The professionals involved in this process saw action planning as a positive and valuable development, but few young people were aware of being involved in this. Because the processes of action planning and recording achievement were not integrated into the learning process, these activities served only to confuse learners, rather than make sense of their learning experience.

The NRA could be most effective in bringing cohesion to seemingly disparate learning programmes. The NRA may provide:

- a record of achievement and success;
- a focus for action planning for the future;
- a record of units of G/NVQs and other qualifications.

New College, Durham, has been piloting the use of computerised action planning systems with learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. Comments from their tutor indicate there are generic gains, in addition to those of action planning, from such activities.

> 'The notion of independence and using the programme independently was demonstrated by two students when five weeks into using the programme they used the 'drop in' sessions in the Computer Unit to do some work on the programme — in their own time. On a personal note, I got a real kick out of seeing the students outside of their usual workplace (The Work Prep. Unit), using computer equipment "by right" in the main college. I also found that the programme helped me get to know the students in quite a meaningful way. I never thought I'd say that computers could help people get to know each other but it seems in this case, that's what happened. Converted at last.'

For older learners the NRA, together with an individual Action Plan, could be a useful starting point in determining goals. In the absence of pre level 1 NVQ, the NRA could hold valuable evidence of progress the achievement of towards level 1 units.

Managing Learning (FEU, 1993) examines action planning processes and NRAs and suggests a learning management system as a way of bringing all this together. This system is being examined by most post-16 providers in County Durham, including special schools, for its applicability in teaching and learning. Results thus far indicate a considerable degree of congruence between what is proposed and what would work in practice.

DEVELOPING COMPETENCE

Another FEU project involving six colleges in three regions involves managers and practitioners using the guidelines in *Developing Competence* (FEU, 1992) to audit their current provision with a view to producing an action plan for developing a competence-based approach for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

The colleges have been encouraged to keep the audit process uncomplicated and to make good use of existing information and resources. Colleges may 'get stuck' at the audit stage when more time should be spent on action planning and implementation. A partnership approach between senior managers and leading practitioners is encouraged as this proved extremely effective in a previous trialling exercise of FEU's *Planning FE Handbook: Equal opportunities for people with disabilities or special educational needs.*

The colleges have used the guidelines and action points from *Developing Competence* to determine the college's starting point by means of simple measures (✓ = in place, x = not in place, ? = needs developing). The audit has helped them to determine priorities for development as well as recording and acknowledging success to date.

Colleges were given advice about formulating action plans, the basis of which is on page 6; an example of a completed action plan is on page 7.

Plans for the implementation of *Developing Competence* are explicitly related to the overall college development plan.

THE WAY AHEAD

Current changes in the FE sector could bring enormous benefits to learners with disabilities and learning difficulties. The Funding Councils have recognised the needs of such learners, by reference to them in nearly every circular with the emphasis on progression towards qualifications. This will require even greater rigour, expertise and flexibility from providers and planners accompanied by positive attitudes.

A great deal being done. As an indication of the extent of interest, FEU has recently contributed to a national mapping exercise which produced a 150-page directory of projects concerned with access to vocational qualifications for learners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Regular developments in colleges are all relevant to learners with disabilities and learning difficulties and advice on these matters is contained in many FEU publications, most notably *Flexible Colleges, Individuality in Learning, Managing Learning,* and *Learner Support Services.* Teachers involved with students with disabilities and learning difficulties are strongly encouraged to draw on advice aimed at all lecturers rather than just on that of a more specialist nature.

Implementation of *Developing Competence*

COLLEGE ACTION PLAN

Priority for action — Note here one development you wish to undertake after consideration of *Developing Competence*. It could be as broad as changing the level of integration (p.10 of *Developing Competence*) or as detailed as reviewing assessment procedures (p.26 of *Developing Competence*)

Why?	What?	When?	Who?	Resources?	College development plan	Evaluation
Why is this a priority? Is it a feature of the college development plan? Have you identified it by using the guidelines in *Developing Competence*? Is it some other priority?	Describe the targets set for a section or department of the college (NB the action points in *Developing Competence*)	Note the dates you have set for achievement	Who is responsible for achieving these targets and to who will they report?	What resources will be necessary to achieve these targets? How will they be secured and managed?	Note here the contribution to the next college development plan	What will be the systems of monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the development?

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Implementation of *Developing Competence*
COLLEGE ACTION PLAN

Priority for action To improve the employability of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties

Why?	What?	When?	Who?	Resources?	College development plan	Evaluation
The college wishes to move to a more integrated programme for students with learning difficulties. Also we need to improve our delivery of courses etc. to all students who present some difficulties	1. Develop structured entry and diagnostic assessment procedure including APL and careers advice	By September	Student services	Staff time		All meetings will be documented Any difficulties in achieving targets will be noted and acted upon How far each target is achieved will be analysed against the document *Developing Competence*
	2. Review learning opportunities of six divisions Review access to learning programmes especially NVQ Analyse and adjust balance of vocational skills	By summer term	(names of staff responsible) HoDs Reporting to steering committee	Questionnaire to all staff with case studies Secretarial support for analysis stationery	Will affect content of next strategic plan	
From *Developing competence* recognise we have shortcomings which need addressing Need to raise awareness throughout the college	3. Analyse/improve learning support Develop employability profile ROAs Enhance access to NVQ Involve employers in design, delivery and assessment Ensure work experience is assessed Develop 'stepping stone' programmes to level 1 NVQ	September to December 1993	(names of staff responsible) Course teams Report to steering committee	Time Secretarial support for meetings	Course teams will be clearer of their input for students with learning difficulties and will add to their divisional programmes	The steering committee will monitor the progress of the project against the timetable To prepare interim and final reports concerning how far the targets are realistic and achievable
Recognise a need to upgrade staff awareness and ability to teach students who present learning difficulties	4. Staff skills audit Joint training for NVQ Review college policy on students with special needs Establish an advisory group to include TEC and employer representatives	Summer term	(names of staff responsible) Staff development officers	Time Secretarial support	Will enable a clearer picture to be painted in the plan	Track sample of E1 entry students over the first term

INVITATION TO RESPOND

FEU would be interested in receiving feedback on the issues raised in this bulletin.

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SOURCES OF INFORMATION FROM FEU

Developing Competence (1992)

Flexible Colleges (1991)

Individuality in Learning (1991)

Managing Learning: The role of the recording of achievement (1993)

Supporting Learning Part 1

Transition into Employment 1 (1992)

Project Information Bulletin RP760: The Assessment of Young People and Adults with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities after the Further and Higher Education Act 1992

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

FEFC Circular 93/05: *Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities*

WRFE Development Fund Projects:

FE Support to meet particular needs (1991-2) Northern Council for Further Education

NVQs and Disability (1991-2) Yorkshire and Humberside Association for Further and Higher Education

Special Training Needs Directory (Accredited Training Centre, University of the West of England, Bristol, 1993)

FURTHER INFORMATION

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